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INITIATION AND "SERVICE"

Among the characteristics of modern "pseudo-initiatic" organizations, there is perhaps none more general nor more striking than the fact of attributing an esoteric and initiatic value to considerations that can have a more or less acceptable meaning only within the most purely exoteric domain; such a confusion is moreover in a certain sense inevitable on the part of profanes who, wishing to pass themselves off as what they are not, lay claim to speaking of things they are ignorant of and of which they naturally form an idea proportioned to what they are capable of understanding. No less naturally, the considerations of this kind on which they insist most are always in conformity with the predominant tendencies of the present epoch, and they even follow these in their more or less secondary variations; one might ask, in this regard, how the fact of thus undergoing the influence of the profane world can be reconciled with even the slightest initiatic pretensions; but, naturally, those concerned do not in the least perceive what is contradictory in this. One could easily cite such organizations which, at their beginnings, gave the illusion of a certain intellectuality, at least to those who did not go to the bottom of things, and which subsequently came to confine themselves more and more within the worst sentimental banalities; and it is evident that this display of sentimentalism merely corresponds to what can also be observed at present in the "external world." One encounters, moreover, on both sides, exactly the same formulas, at once empty and grandiloquent, whose effect belongs to those "suggestions" to which we have often alluded, although those who employ them are certainly not always themselves conscious of the ends toward which all this tends; and the ridicule they present in the eyes of anyone who knows how to reflect even a little is further increased when they serve for parodies of esoterism. This ridicule is moreover a veritable "mark" of the influences that are really acting behind all this, even if those who

obey them are far from suspecting it; we have already explained ourselves on this subject, and we wish here only to return to a case that seems to us particularly significant, and which is connected in a certain way with what we indicated in our previous article.

In the special phraseology of the organizations in question, there are words that recur uniformly and with an ever-increasing insistence: these words are “service” and “servants”; more and more, they are found everywhere and on every occasion; there is here something like an obsession, and one may legitimately ask to what kind of “suggestion” they correspond. Doubtless, one must allow here for the Western mania for “humility,” or rather, to speak more exactly, for its outward display, since the reality may be very different, just as when, in the same milieus, the most violent and hateful quarrels are accompanied by great discourses on “universal brotherhood.” It is moreover well understood that, in this case, it is a wholly “lay” and “democratic” humility that is involved, in perfect accord with an “ideal” that consists, not in raising the inferior to the extent of its capacity, but on the contrary in lowering the superior to its level; it is clear indeed that one must be imbued with this modern “ideal,” essentially anti-hierarchical, in order not to perceive what is unpleasant in such expressions, even if it happens that the intentions they cover are nothing but laudable in themselves. No doubt one would have to distinguish, under this latter aspect, between the very diverse applications that may be made of them; but what matters to us here is only the state of mind betrayed by the words employed.

However, these remarks, entirely general and equally valid in all cases, are not sufficient when it is more specifically a matter of “pseudo-initiation”; there is then, in addition, a confusion of the kind we pointed out at the beginning, a confusion due to the preponderance attributed by moderns to action on the one hand and to the social point of view on the other, which leads them to imagine that these things must intervene even in a domain where they in fact have no place. By one of those strange inversions of all normal order to which our epoch is accustomed, the most exterior activities come to be regarded as essential conditions of

initiation, sometimes even as its very goal, for, incredible as this may be, there are those who go so far as to see in it nothing other than a means of better "serving"; and, let it be well noted, there is yet an aggravating circumstance in that these activities are in fact conceived in the most profane manner, being devoid of the traditional character, albeit naturally entirely exoteric, that they could at least assume if they were envisaged from a religious point of view; but there is indeed a long way from religion to the simple "humanitarian" moralism that is the practice of "pseudo-initiates" of every category!

On the other hand, it is incontestable that sentimentalism, under all its forms, always disposes toward a certain "passivity"; here we rejoin the question that we have already treated previously, and it is also here that one finds, very probably, the principal reason for the "suggestion" that we now have in view, and in any case what renders it particularly dangerous. Indeed, by dint of repeating to someone that he must "serve" anything whatsoever, even vague "ideal" entities, one ends by putting him into such dispositions that he will be ready to "serve" effectively, when the occasion presents itself, all that claims to incarnate these entities or to represent them in a more positive manner; and the orders he may then receive, whatever their character may be, even if they go so far as the worst extravagances, will find in him the obedience of a veritable "servant." One will easily understand that this means is one of the best that can be employed to prepare instruments that "counter-initiation" will be able to use at will; and it further has the advantage of being one of the least compromising, since "suggestion," in cases of this kind, can very well be exercised by vulgar dupes, that is to say by other unconscious instruments, without those who direct them unknowingly ever needing to intervene directly.

Let it not be objected that, where it is thus a question of "service," there could in sum be a path of bhakti; despite the sentimental element that this implies to a certain extent, it is something entirely different; and even if one wishes to render bhakti as "devotion," as is most commonly done, although this is only a derived meaning and the primary and essential sense of the word is in reality that of "participation," as M.

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy has shown, “devotion” is not “service,” or at least it would be exclusively “divine service,” and not, as we said a moment ago, “service” of anyone or of anything whatsoever. As for the “service” of a guru, if one insists on using this word where such a thing exists, it is, we repeat, only by way of preparatory discipline, concerning solely what one might call the “aspirants,” and not those who have already attained effective initiation; and here again we are very far from the character of high spiritual finality so curiously attributed to “service” by “pseudo-initiates.” Finally, since all objections must be anticipated, as for the links existing between the members of an initiatic organization, one cannot obviously give the name of “service” to the help given by the superior as such to the inferior, nor more generally to relations in which the double hierarchy of degrees and functions must always be rigorously observed.

We shall not insist further on this subject, which is on the whole rather disagreeable; but at least we have thought it necessary, seeing to how many diverse and suspect “services” people are today invited on all sides, to point out the danger hidden beneath this and to state clearly what the matter is, even at the risk of drawing upon ourselves once again invectives to which we are far too accustomed to fear them. To conclude in two words, we shall simply say this: the initiate has no need to be a “servant,” or, at least, he must be so only of the Truth.

ON “ANIMISM” AND “SHAMANISM”

The idea that there exist things that are purely “material” is a wholly modern conception, and one whose meaning it would moreover be rather difficult to specify clearly, for the very notion of “matter,” as it is currently understood, is far from being clear; and, as we have pointed out on various occasions, one finds nothing in traditional doctrines that truly corresponds to it. But, fundamentally, one can understand what is meant without encumbering oneself with all the complications added by the special theories of physicists: it is simply the idea that there are beings and things that are only corporeal, and whose existence and constitution imply no element of an order other than that. It is then easy to realize that this idea is directly linked to the profane point of view, as it is affirmed in modern sciences: these are essentially characterized by the absence of any attachment to principles of a higher order; likewise, the things they take as the object of their study are themselves conceived as devoid of such attachment, and this is, one might say, a condition for science to be adequate to its object, since, if it admitted that it were otherwise, it would thereby have to acknowledge that the true nature of this object escapes it. Perhaps one should not seek elsewhere the reason why “scientists” have so fiercely endeavored to discredit every conception other than this, by presenting it as a “superstition” due to the imagination of “primitives,” who, for them, can be nothing other than savages or men of infantile mentality, as “evolutionist” theories would have it; and whether this be incomprehension or bias on their part, they in fact succeed in giving of it a sufficiently caricatural idea for such an appraisal to appear entirely justified to all those who take them at their word, that is to say to the great majority of our contemporaries.

We wish here to allude in particular to the theories of ethnologists concerning what they have agreed to call “animism”; such a term could indeed, at a pinch, have an acceptable meaning, but obviously only on condition of understanding it quite otherwise than they do, and of seeing in it only what it can signify etymologically, and it is this point that we shall try to explain as clearly as possible. The corporeal world, in reality,

must not be considered as a self-sufficient whole, nor as something isolated within the ensemble of universal manifestation; on the contrary, as we have explained at length elsewhere, it proceeds entirely from the subtle order, in which it has, one may say, its immediate principle, and through the intermediary of which it is linked, step by step, to informal manifestation, then to the unmanifested; if it were otherwise, its existence could only be a pure and simple illusion, a sort of phantasmagoria behind which there would be nothing. Under these conditions, there can be, in this corporeal world, no thing whose existence does not ultimately rest on elements of the subtle order, and, beyond these, on a principle that may be said to be "spiritual," and without which no manifestation is possible at any degree whatsoever.

If we confine ourselves to the consideration of subtle elements, which must thus be present in all things of this world, we may say that they correspond there to what constitutes the "psychic" order in the human being; one may therefore, by a wholly natural extension that implies no "anthropomorphism," but only a perfectly legitimate analogy, also call them "psychic" in all cases, or again "animic," for these two words, if one refers to their primary meaning according to their respective Greek and Latin derivations, are in fact exactly synonymous. It follows from this that, whatever the appearances may be, there can really be no "inanimate" objects; this is moreover why "life" is one of the conditions to which all corporeal existence is subject without exception; and this is also why no one has ever been able to arrive at a satisfactory definition of the distinction between the "living" and the "non-living," this question, like so many others in modern philosophy and science, being insoluble only because it has no reason truly to arise, since the "non-living" has no place in the domain envisaged, and since in sum everything is reduced in this regard to simple differences of degree.

One may therefore, if one wishes, call "animism" such a way of envisaging things, understanding by this word nothing more nor other than the affirmation that there are in them "animic" elements; and it is moreover evident that this conception is "primitive," but quite simply because it is true, which is almost exactly the opposite of what

“evolutionists” mean when they qualify it thus. At the same time, and for the same reason, this conception is necessarily common to all traditional doctrines; one might therefore also say that it is “normal,” whereas the opposite idea, that of “inanimate” things, represents a veritable anomaly, as is the case moreover for all ideas that are specifically modern. But it must be well understood that there is in all this absolutely no question of a “personification” of natural forces, nor of their “adoration,” as is claimed by those for whom “animism” constitutes what they believe they can call “primitive religion”; in reality, these are considerations that belong solely to the domain of cosmology, and that can find their application in various traditional sciences. It goes without saying also that, when it is a question of “psychic” elements inherent in things, or of forces of the same order expressing and manifesting themselves through them, all this has absolutely nothing “spiritual” about it; the confusion of these two domains is again purely modern, and it is doubtless not unrelated to the idea of making a “religion” of what is science in the most exact sense of the word; despite their claim to “clear ideas,” our contemporaries mix in a very singular manner the most heterogeneous and the most essentially distinct things!

Now, it is important to note that ethnologists are in the habit of regarding as “primitive” forms that are, on the contrary, degenerate to one degree or another; nevertheless, very often they are not really at a level as low as their interpretations would suggest; but, be that as it may, this explains how “animism,” which in sum constitutes only a particular point of a doctrine, could have been taken to characterize that doctrine as a whole. Indeed, in cases of degeneration, it is naturally the superior part of the doctrine, that is to say its metaphysical and “spiritual” side, that always disappears more or less completely; consequently, what was originally only secondary, and notably the cosmological and “psychic” side, to which “animism” and its applications belong, takes on a preponderant importance; the rest, even if it still subsists to a certain extent, may easily escape the outside observer, all the more so as the latter, ignorant of the profound significance of rites and symbols, is incapable of recognizing in them what pertains to a higher order, and

believes he can explain everything indiscriminately in terms of “magic,” or even sometimes of pure and simple “sorcery.”

One may find a very clear example of what we have just indicated in a case such as that of “shamanism,” which is generally regarded as one of the typical forms of “animism”: this designation, whose derivation is moreover rather uncertain, properly designates the ensemble of traditional doctrines and practices of certain Mongol peoples of Siberia; but some extend it to what elsewhere presents more or less similar characteristics. For many, “shamanism” is almost synonymous with sorcery, which is certainly incorrect, for there is there quite another thing; this word has thus undergone an inverse deviation from that of “fetishism,” which, for its part, does etymologically have the meaning of sorcery, but which has been applied to things in which there is not only that either. Let us note, in this regard, that the distinction that some have wished to establish between “shamanism” and “fetishism,” considered as two varieties of “animism,” is perhaps not as clear nor as important as they think: whether it be human beings, as in the first case, or objects of any kind, as in the second, that serve principally as “supports” or “condensers,” so to speak, for certain influences, this is a simple difference of “technical” modalities, which in sum has nothing absolutely essential about it.[1]

If one considers “shamanism” properly so called, one finds there the existence of a very developed cosmology, which could give rise to comparisons with those of other traditions on numerous points, beginning with the division of the “three worlds,” which seems to constitute its very basis. On the other hand, one also encounters rites comparable to some of those that belong to traditions of the highest order: some, for example, strikingly recall Vedic rites, and are even among those that most manifestly proceed from the primordial tradition, such as those in which the symbols of the tree and the swan play the principal role. There is therefore no doubt that there is here something which, at its origins at least, constituted a regular and normal traditional form; moreover, there has been preserved in it, down to the present epoch, a certain “transmission” of the powers necessary for the exercise

of the functions of the “shaman”; but when one sees that the latter devotes his activity especially to the lowest traditional sciences, such as magic and divination, one may suspect from this that there has been a very real degeneration, and even wonder whether at times it might not go so far as a veritable deviation, to which things of this order, when they take on such excessive development, can all too easily give rise.

There are, in this regard, rather disquieting indications; one of these is the link established between the “shaman” and an animal, a link concerning exclusively an individual and which consequently is in no way assimilable to the collective link that constitutes what is called, rightly or wrongly, “totemism.” We must moreover say that what is involved here could, in itself, be susceptible of an entirely legitimate interpretation having nothing to do with sorcery; but what gives it a more suspect character is that, among certain peoples, if not among all, the animal is then regarded in some manner as a form of the “shaman” himself; and from such an identification to “lycanthropy,” as it exists especially among peoples of the black race, there is perhaps not an extremely great distance.

But there is yet something else: the “shamans,” among the psychic influences with which they have to deal, quite naturally distinguish two kinds, some beneficent and others maleficent; and, as there is evidently nothing to fear from the former, it is with the latter that they concern themselves almost exclusively; such appears to be at least the most frequent case, for it is possible that “shamanism” comprises quite varied forms among which distinctions would have to be made in this regard. There is, moreover, absolutely no question of a “cult” rendered to these maleficent influences, which would be a sort of conscious “satanism,” as has sometimes been wrongly supposed; it is only a matter of preventing them from harming, of neutralizing or diverting their action. The same remark could also apply to other supposed “devil worshippers” who exist in various regions; in a general way, it is scarcely likely that real “satanism” could be the fact of an entire people.

Nevertheless, it is no less true that the contact, so to speak constant,

with these inferior psychic forces is among the most dangerous, first for the “shaman” himself, that goes without saying, and also from another point of view whose interest is much less narrowly “localized.” Indeed, it may happen that some, operating in a more conscious manner and with more extensive knowledge, which does not mean of a higher order, make use of these same forces for entirely different ends, without the knowledge of the “shamans” or of those who act like them, and who then play only the role of simple instruments for the accumulation of the forces in question at determined points. We know that there thus exist, throughout the world, a certain number of “reservoirs” of tenebrous influences whose distribution is assuredly not fortuitous, and which serve all too well the designs of “counter-initiation.”